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"O beauty!": a liberationist critique of the New York City Opera's renaissance LGBTQ initiative

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Vassar College

"O Beauty!"

A Liberationist Critique of The New York City Opera's Renaissance LGBTQ Initiative

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
in Sociology

by

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Abstract The visibility of queer life has transformed profoundly in the past decade; we've been granted the federal protection to marry, queer characters in film and television are portrayed with depth and complexity never before seen, and debates surrounding the deconstruction of the gender binary are beginning to demonstrate some progress. In this thesis, I explore the New York City Opera's Renaissance LGBTQ initiative, which is operationalized by the production of two operas on gay themes, within the broader societal shift we are witnessing occurring within queer acceptance, hegemonic integration, and spectacle. I employ both a socio-historical analysis of the relationship between opera and queerness and an in-depth content analysis of the new productions themselves in order to analyze how they function within this new social imaginary of queerness. By adopting the theoretical perspectives of pro-liberationist queer sociologists, namely, those employed by Koestenbaum (2001), Butler (1990), Halperin (2012), Gamson and Moon (2004), Seidman (2002) and Puar (2007), I posit these artistic works as symptomatically within the white-patriarchal hegemonic project of constructing the idealized gay citizen.

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~Overture~

Gay Today

It is without question that society has seen an intense change in the past decade surrounding the formal and general acceptance of non-heteronormative sexualities. With the supreme court decision *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), marriage was federally recognized as a right guaranteed to same-sex couples. This decision arrived after about a decade of steady state-by-state recognition, a progression that I witnessed developing throughout middle and high school. Although I didn't "come out" until my senior year, my best friend growing up is gay, and had a moment of political fervor in the 7th grade, which was in 2008. I remember how he would proudly walk into school with a shirt featuring a map of the United States, with rainbow filling in the outlines of the then seven states which had legalized same-sex marriage. He was subjected to cruel bullying for wearing the shirt, but despite the merciless derision he endured, he ended up "coming out" as bisexual at the end of the year. Our two other best friends at the time decided they didn't want to be his friend anymore, claiming his identity was against their religious beliefs, and he subsequently forced himself back into the closet, not to emerge again for three years.

I believe that my friend's experience of stigmatization, and the repression of my own sexuality under the pressures of the masculine hegemony manifesting in the public schools I attended, are typical examples of the experience of growing up as a gay, white, economically comfortable male in 2000's America. My high school, although larger than most at 4,000 students (larger than my undergraduate college population), exhibited the characteristics of the commonplace imaginary of the American public school. It was heavily socially stratified into

"cliques", the more typically masculine boys achieving the highest social status, the more feminine girls were the "popular" ones. For people like me and my best friend, who didn't conform to the expectations of our genders, "fitting in" was rendered nearly impossible.

I remember the day I learned about federal recognition of gay marriage, the first thing I thought of was that shirt my best friend wore. I thought about how a shirt like that would never have to exist again, because the nation had finally stood up for homosexuality. Marriage, perhaps the most powerful hegemonic institution in the country, the institution which defines what relationships should be, and, consequently, what love should look like, the societally prescribed goal of how to exist as an adult, how to ideally structure one's life, had fundamentally changed. I was elated initially! Homosexuality was finally going to be treated as normal.

But then I started taking a closer look. I talked to my more marginalized queer friends that I had made at Vassar, and they opened my eyes to the truly detrimental consequences of the absorption of same-sex intimacy into a masculinist and oppressive system. I realized that while my friend, had he been in middle school now, would have benefitted spiritually and socially from the federal recognition of same-sex unions, so many other identities are going to suffer even more. They fear that gays in the best position to help, those with the most available access to enacting change because of their race, gender identity, and economic status, would feel that their work is done, and leave behind the rest of our community to fend for themselves.

The situation I'm describing, my personal experience with my identity as society changed around me, can be better understood through a discussion of the somewhat recent sociological phenomenon of homonationalism, a term introduced by feminist scholar Jasbir Puar (2007). In *Queer Times, Queer Assemblages*, Puar delineates how contemporary nationalism, fueled by a

narrative of opposition to fundamentalist terror, has incorporated queer identity into its ideological hegemony in order to further dichotomize the constructed civil liberal democracy state from a purported totalitarian other. She writes;

That is, queerness is proffered as a sexually exceptional form of American national sexuality through a rhetoric of sexual modernization that is simultaneously able to castigate the other as homophobic *and* perverse, and construct the imperialist center as "tolerant" but sexually, racially, and gendered normal. Queerness colludes with U.S. exceptionalisms embedded in nationalist foreign policy via the articulation and production of whiteness as a queer norm and the tacit acceptance of U.S. imperialist expansion. (122-123)

I would add to the above statement that this "queer norm" of whiteness is also imagined as cisgender. Especially in an Olympics year, when nationalist sentiment is ubiquitously espoused by the media, an awareness and critique of homonationalism is particularly necessary. "Out" athletes are making headlines, and their identities are consequently being used to strengthen imperialist white democracy. I think of Gus Kenworthy, the American white, gay, cisgender freestyle skier, whose TV spot for *Head and Shoulders* featured the first pride flag ever to appear in a national commercial. The text of the commercial is a striking example; the company is using the cliché of carrying your responsibilities on your shoulders as their tagline, and in Kenworthy's voice-over, he states, "My shoulders carry more than my country's pride; they carry my community's pride" (from Ellen, broadcast February 5, 2018). The shot cuts from Kenworthy in his Olympic uniform to him carrying a rainbow flag, flowing behind him over his shoulders.

Kenworthy's positionality as the athletic, patriotic white male is concordant with the government's prescription of acceptable lived identity, and in a society that adopts a homonationalist agenda, the state invests in a queerness that bolsters its power and the sanctity of its structure. To return to monogamous marriage, law scholar Gregg Strauss (2016) explains the

state's investment in codifying human intimacy and in creating an idealization of the family unit as a schema for resolving the tension in sharing individual liberty with a partner;

Civil marriage resolves this tension. Spouses may hold this authority over one another's liberty because the law regulates marriage entry and exit. Marriage's entry rules give spouses the power to control the creation of these flexible, open-ended duties. During marriage, states will not intervene to enforce marital obligations, which enables spouses to structure their shared lives with indeterminate duties. When marriages end through death or divorce, the law offers equitable remedies to ensure their choices during marriage do not burden either spouse's liberty unfairly. Property division, alimony, and the elective share enable spouses to share lives without risking subordination. We have a fundamental right to marry because only civil marriage can reconcile intimate liberty with equal liberty. (1695)

Strauss is illustrating that outside of its explicitly procreative function, marriage, as codified by the state, supports the American hallmark of democracy; equality for all. Historically, this has proven to actually mean equality for all straight white men of economic means, but since 2015, gay men are now officially allowed to participate, too.

But where does opera fit in?

The word opera seems to immediately conjure up an image of some elegant hall filled with wealthy socialites clad in tuxedos and gowns; it elicits the ideation of an art form that had died with the era of the aristocracy, one that it is somehow completely antithetical to a contemporary egalitarian society that admonishes conspicuous consumption. But this is not the case. The conservative conception of opera continues to exist, and new works continue to be produced, but, like most art forms, they are produced and created in different ways than they ever have been before.

The moment in queer life we see today intersects with the moment we are seeing with opera in America in a site inhabited by two contemporary operas, which are adaptations of two of the most famous mainstream artistic depictions of queer life: Tony Kushner's *Angels in*

America and Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain*. The operas have been centrally integrated into the repertoire of the resurrected New York City Opera, a company which has throughout its history focused on radicalizing public conceptions of the art form, as part of its new LGBTQ initiative. But to laud the company's decision to "celebrate gay pride"¹ without sociological criticism is foolhardy, especially with a consideration of homonationalism and the penetration of capitalism into queer life. A socio-historical analysis will provide the foundation for a critique of the political virtues of these two operas as potential vehicles for LGBTQI* progress.

Act I will explore the art form of opera itself through a queer sociological lens in order to understand the investment of gay audiences in operatic works. In studying the formal qualities of opera within this framework, I argue that the affective resonance opera has with gay audiences of economic means, audiences dominated by cisgender white men, reveals the group's fundamental yearning for a liberationist queer politic. In identifying with the plot formats, characters, and structure of the operatic form, these gay men exhibit a longing for a post-binary futurity of gender, a futurity which they both consciously and unconsciously work against through the adoption of an assimilationist and reformist ethic.

Act II will provide the earlier context for understanding the state of opera in America today by observing how it transitioned into the early twentieth century, at the advent of populist art. In continuing to weave a thread of nationalist discourse, I will indicate how and why opera segregated itself from more mass-consumed music and theater instead of integrating new musical and dramatic idioms, subsequently bolstering the dichotomy between the development of a distinctly American musical tradition and the legacy of European opera.

¹ nycopera.com/season

Act III will undertake a close content analysis of articles pertaining to the history of the New York City Opera Company (NYCO), the company which is producing two operas in consecutive seasons in the post-marriage equality era on gay themes, and is doing so, according to the marketing language on the company's website, to "celebrate gay pride". A sociological engagement with the company's history will provide a microcosm for the process of maintaining a liberalist approach to the presentation of opera in America in the late-20th and 21st centuries, a process fraught by the shifting composition of consumers of the art form. By concluding this chapter with a discussion of gay marketing, I attempt to illustrate how the company is exploiting the positionality of the "homonormative" gay, a term coined by queer theorist Lisa Duggan (2003), in an attempt to re-establish capital after declaring bankruptcy in 2013.

Act IV will closely examine the two operas *Angels in America* by Peter Eötvös, Tony Kushner, and Mari Mezei and *Brokeback Mountain* by Charles Wuorinen and Annie Proulx, which are the aforementioned new works helming the NYCO's post-revival seasons. In investigating the subjects of the operas, and the societal milieus which surrounded the works they are adapted from, I employ a sociological perspective of art that contributes to fully comprehending the social and political trajectories of the primary benefactors of assimilationist queer politics. Tony Kushner's play and Ang Lee's film can both be interpreted as artistic emblems of the mainstream gay societal milieus of their respective eras, and their adaptations to the operatic form in the post-marriage equality era can thus achieve a more nuanced significance with this historical framing. *Angels* premiered in 1993 to wide acclaim and is about the AIDS crisis among gay men in New York; *Brokeback Mountain*, a commercially and critically successful 2005 film about a licentious and ill-fated relationship between two cowboys in the

1950s American midwest, was a novel and complicated confrontation of the general public with the realities of gay social psychology.

Cadence

In perhaps the most affecting moment of Benjamin Britten's 1951 operatic adaptation of Hermann Melville's novella *Billy Budd*, the master-of-arms John Claggart sings an aria about his sexual feelings to the newly impressed Budd. As his feelings torment him, he decides that the only solution to his untenable lust is the destruction of himself or Budd. He declares, over twentieth-century musical harmonies, and dissonant melodic lines,

O beauty, o handsomeness, goodness!
You surely in my power tonight.
Nothing can defend you.
Nothing! So may it be!
For what hope remains if love can escape?
If love still lives and grows strong where I cannot enter,
what hope is there in my own dark world for me?²

In the source material, Claggart's sexuality is certainly more nuanced - the explicit characterization of the fearsome figure as harboring secret feelings towards Budd is an invention of the composer. And this decision is probably informed by the composer's biography - Britten was gay himself, and although he lived a relatively open life for his time, he certainly struggled with his deviant sexuality against British heteronormativity.

With Britten's handling of Claggart as an example, the creation of art can be imagined as a methodology for transcending the confines of societal rigidity. In creating works of art, artists can confront how the existing construction of the world is obstructive to the achievement of

² <http://www.opera-arias.com/britten/billy-budd/libretto/>

selfhood and spiritual fulfillment for so many human beings. We like to consume the art that resonates with us, that makes us feel that things can be different, that there is a space for embodying life outside of the imprisoning reality of our expectations. This affective response is a wholly individual process, and through art we realize our selfhood and discover who we are.

But the escape that art provides us also allows us to delay the real work of change. We can watch a play where a person in abject poverty dies of starvation, cry at their plight, then return to our lives, having done nothing to assuage the problem that inspired the play's creation. Opera has served this purpose for centuries to different communities, and its consumers have exhibited this interaction with art. The task of creating art that actually generates social change is a daunting one, and I argue that despite the NYC Opera Company's claim to be evoking change with the inclusion of operas on gay themes, the company's inability to separate itself from opera's legacy has instead generated yet another site of homonationalist, heterosexist oppression.

~Act I~

The Operatic as a Site for Queer Sociological Inquiry

How can we begin to conceive of opera as a distinctively sociological phenomenon, an art form that is a product of queer social consciousness? Opera's formal aesthetic qualities present us with unique considerations in analyzing its sociological implications. In this chapter, I will explore some of the ways in which opera as an art form can be ideated within the context of the social imaginary, where art is as much a site for questioning matters of sexual identity and ontological fluidity as it is much as it is about culture, beauty, and performance. The empirical case studies I've chosen to explore represent a curation of those aspects which also hold salient theoretical value for a queer investigation of the operatic.

This chapter's investigation will evoke the frontier of this relatively novel social scientific research on the art form, research which shifts focus from class and capital consumption theoretical frameworks to a more endogenous approach that investigates meaning produced and understood from within the community (Benzecry 5-7). A queer analysis, namely, one that analyzes opera using methodologies that subvert scholarly discourses predicated on the sanctity of the gender and sexual binary, is certainly deserved within this new framework, as affect and aestheticism carry sexualized connotations that do not always fall within rigid categories.

Two categories emerged in my research as thematic foci; opera's emphasis and reliance on, and reverence of, the voice as the foundational medium of artistic communication, and the operatic imaginary as a schema for the artistic exploration of queer passion.

The Medium of The Voice

Sociologist Claudio E. Benzecry (2011), in his ethnographic study of the ardent fans of the Colón Opera House in Buenos Aires, observed from his research the role that the human voice plays in affecting the body. He writes,

...there is a movement in focus that makes of the voice the locus of the transition from the body of the performer to the body of the audience member. In this transition, the body of the fan is framed as a surface for the inscription of effects, which is, nevertheless, productive as their own bodies engage in many activities during the performance. (87)

Benzecry is explaining the ethereal reaction that the voice catalyzes in one's engagement with an operatic work. This transcendent nature of the human voice has been a central subject of the scholarly engagement with opera since the art form's inception, and an analysis of this phenomenon can be categorized into what Benzecry refers to as the "sociology of affect" (183).

Richard Wagner, perhaps the most significant contributor to the modern chronology of opera, and certainly one of the most prolific, explored the peculiarly affective queer nature of the human voice in his manifestos on the art form. Wagner revered singing as the elemental medium of human communication. In *The Music of the Future* (1860), he wrote, "...the assumption that the first language of mankind must have had a great resemblance to singing, need not perhaps appear ridiculous" (158). He goes on, "and since the modern European languages, further divided into different classes, began to follow their purely conventional development with an increasingly obvious tendency, music has developed, on the other hand, into a hitherto unknown capability of expression" (159). For Wagner, the pragmatism of the spoken word has alienated humanity from its communicative roots, leaving music to assume the role of evoking a transcendence of corporeality.

This metaphysical nature of opera is further discussed by opera scholar Gary Tomlinson (1999). Tomlinson's analysis expands the function of musicality in the voice beyond opera to present a more holistic approach, "The effects of operatic singing constitute one subspecies within a huge family of human experiences brought about by heightened utterance- chanting, shouting, singing, incantation, whatever" (4). He goes on to place these experiences in a socio-historical context, "These experiences are found in countless different cultural settings- probably, indeed, they are determining features of all cultural settings. They extend across a span of time that, were we in a position to measure it, would likely be found to equal the whole history of human society" (4). Similar to Wagner and Benzecry, Tomlinson argues that designed use of the voice "connects its bearers and hearers to ordinarily supersensible realities" (4).³

How does the notion of vocal music as a medium for metaphysical consummation relate to queer engagement with social reality? One point of convergence is ironically that both vocal musicality and queer identity share a distinction of *divergence* from practical categorization. The affective nature of musical intonation is indefinable within the nexus of empirical thought; it is its own entity, its hypnotic power beyond our rational speech-oriented comprehension. Post-binary approaches to queer social theory posit queerness as a similarly inconceivable phenomenon. I refer to feminist scholar Judith Butler (1990), who asserts,

Inasmuch as "identity" is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of "the person" is called into question by the cultural emergence of those "incoherent" or "discontinuous" gendered beings who appear to be person but fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are define. (17)

³ Tomlinson indicates that the effects of the voice are dependent upon it being "employed in exceptional ways and in special, carefully demarcated circumstances" (4); ritual and context are thus deemed essential.

For Butler, queer identity is by definition a subversion of normative thought, and her theory of gender performativity has been instrumental in playing with the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary. Her discursive subversion consequently generates anxiety by prescribers of societal normalcy. Musicologist Philip Brett (2006) observes, "Though it is not proscribed in the same way as homosexuality, music has often been considered a dangerous substance, and agent of moral ambiguity always in danger of bestowing deviant status upon its practitioners" (11). By adopting these insurgent transformations, namely, by imparting music onto the spoken word and assuming a non-heteronormative sexual identity, musicality and queerness share objectives of unsettling preconceived organizations of social thought.

To ground this discussion a bit, scholar Joke Dame's (2006) discussion of the castrato, an opera singer who is male but sings in a high soprano range through mutilation of the genitals, will provide a concrete case study of the queer interpretation of musical vocality. Dame begins their analysis by defining a post-structural queer lens, "I take as a starting point... that gender is constructed, and femininity and masculinity are neither natural nor unalterable, but rather socioculturally and historically determined categories, and therefore subject to change" (140). They continue by indicating how gender ambiguity has been central to the debate surrounding the castrato historically, in that the adoption of the feminine by a masculine body "conveys the idea of the neuter" (142). This neuter thus creates a site "upon which all sorts of fantasies can be projected" (143), casting the supersensible nature of the operatic voice into the context of gender liberation and ambiguity. This connection is further developed by the uniquely bodily nature of operatic singing, "The tension of vocal chords, larynx, and pharynx- that is, the physical effort

involved in producing a tone- is just as characteristic [as the voice itself]... In other words, what you hear is not simply a certain pitch, you also hear a body" (143).

The intersection of corporeality with sound precipitates a sexualized interaction with opera; in the case of the castrato, it introduced "sublimated homoerotics" (Dame 147). As professional castration became socially taboo, tension arose over resolving the issue of how to cast castrato roles in revivals of 17th century operas. The debate is essentially concerned with either maintaining gender at the cost of perverting vocal timbre or maintaining vocal timbre at the cost of mitigating the dramatic tension of the gender binary (Dame 149-150). Dame finds the most socially progressive solution in casting castrati with females;

The casting of women in the leading parts is the contemporary counterpart of the historical baroque performance where the homoerotics of the castrati have been displaced by lesbian erotics... I consider this lesbian representation in modern revivals of baroque operas a present from history, a history that has rendered the authentic casting of castrati impossible, probably for good. (151)

For Dame, a socially progressive opera must renounce the rigidity of the binary to maintain the mystical space of the operatic voice; from a theoretical perspective, this would consequently artistically reinforce a post-structural approach to gender.

I'll conclude this thematic section with a discussion of Wayne Koestenbaum *The Queen's Throat* (2001), which explores the cult of gay male opera fanaticism, a social archetype he labels "opera queens." In Koestenbaum's socio-psychological exploration of the opera queen, he identifies the opera diva as a cultic emissary for the realization of gay personal truth. With the operatic voice, he analogizes opera singing as a vocation to the performance of sexual identity; "The diva can't separate herself from her vocation: her body is her art" (87). When the voice is crippled, the diva's true personhood is exposed; she "proves that seamless singing has been masquerade and now her cracked, decayed, raucous, and undisguised self is coming out" (127).

Koestenbaum's analogy epitomizes conception of the operatic voice as supersensible. Its bearer is a quasi-divine entity, and the loss of that voice returns her to normalcy and conformity. Within masculinist hegemony, deviant sexualities are similarly sensationalized; consequently, participation in queer life is an operatic song within social reality, a bold demonstration of the rejection of hegemonic constructs of identity.

Passion

In contemporary social consciousness, opera is intimately associated with passion. This is passion in all of its complicated definitions: expressions of emotional extremity, unabated conviction, and intense sexual longing. I once again begin with Benzecry;

... a work of art (and cultural objects in general) can be thought of as a locus for personal and emotional investment or a medium for moral self-formation... having a passion for a particular taste is more than expressing a preference... and different from finding an object of attention for a preexisting psychological state: it is a particular kind of engagement with the world, both sensual and meaningful, that allows particular parts of the self to come to the fore, choosing particular lines of action and discarding others. It implies a greater sense of engagement with the actor's self than plain cognition. (184)

The passion of Benzecry's ethnographic subjects is posited as an experience of emotional immersion that allows the opera fanatic to grapple with their social selfhood. Considering how opera has become a crucial space of imagining and operationalizing passion will be relevant to approaching it from a queer theoretical lens, as the sexualized nature of passion argues for the necessity of a non-heteronormative scholarship.

We can begin the chronology of social and philosophical anxiety over the relationship of passion to opera with the revolutions in classical music that occurred during the transition from the 19th to the 20th centuries. Here, Wagner's creative oeuvre will serve as a foundational introduction. Musicologist Frank Turner's (2014) discussion of the composer's work highlights

that his early attempts at opera were characteristic of the then prevailing commercial idiom (194). The works of composer Giuseppe Verdi are emblematic of this idiom, and opera historian William Schoell (2006) contrasts them to Wagner's later futurist model; "An opera by Verdi is like an accessible, well-written commercial bestseller that a talented author has tailored to popular tastes. An opera by Wagner is like the literary novel that is not for every taste, not as accessible, but is well worth the extra work it takes to understand it" (6). What drove Wagner to write operas that pushed into new dimensions of affective gravity can be understood through an assessment of his social acumen. Turner notes Wagner's belief that the opera of his time was a product of societal superficiality; to him it was "decadent and bourgeois,... artificial, shallow, and corrupt" (197). This reality presents a superficiality that is antithetical to an ideation of opera that undertakes the exploration of queer passion.

Wagner's response to this perception of opera is his efforts to create *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total works of art), a "Quest to bring about, in a suitably updated form, a... process of integration of those major art forms, music and drama, which were considered to be especially suitable" (Brown 2016: 2). Wagner undertook the task of unifying dramatic gravitas with operatic performance, an integration which was yet to be achieved by other composers (Schoell 2006: 6). His methods of achieving this unity were to pioneer the use of musical motifs to associate different characters, feelings, or events, called Leitmotifs, and to expand the emotive capacity of the orchestra. Wagner scholar Hilda Brown (2016) writes,

These twin innovations, reinforced by the application of subject matter based on a highly individualized form of mythology, power a comprehensive vision of the human condition and its relation to external forces, a vision which is communicated with an intensity of utterance and range of expressiveness- nowhere more evident than in the orchestration- hitherto unparalleled in the history of opera. (2)

Wagner's novel approach solidified opera's role as an art of passion, of intense affective power and erotic capacity; this reformation of the art form would come to define its subsequent development into epic rather than more literal musical forms (Daub 2014: 2-3).

The tension of opera's hybridization, which Wagner ventured to resolve through his work, can be interpreted through the interjection of a queer sociological perspective. I return to Koestenbaum, who asserts that "opera's queerest feature is its divided foundation, its marriage of words and music" (176). He explains this position by elucidating the gendered nature of words and music; "it's a commonplace idea that language is masculine and that music is feminine" (177). In consuming opera, "we forget the difference between words and music, masculine and feminine, because opera is a bastard genre, a hybrid, erasing distinctions" (177). With Koestenbaum's analysis, I find that Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* assumes a particularly queer connotation, as it assumes the goal of uniting music and drama into a singular entity.

Adrian Daub's (2014) scholarship on Wagner's compositional idiom further highlights how Wagner's operas demonstrate a new artistic realization of the erotic. He writes, "The plots of his operas seemed to deal with the erotic in new ways; the intense chromaticism, the luxuriant, yearning tempi of his music, and the constant deferral of harmonic resolution smacked to his contemporaries of a barely sublimated eroticism" (5). Daub is arguing that the subversive nature of Wagner's music itself, often found in tonal ambiguity, compounds the explicit character of his opera's presentations of love and sexuality. These presentations argue for a love that "asserts its *autonomy* from the larger structures of society, of morality, and even of history" (9). Wagner's artistic ideation of love, and the attempts of his successors to emulate it, can thus be cast as a

distant predecessor to queer post-structural notions of sexuality, in that they attempt to undermine societal constructions and prescriptions of the romantic.

Another operatic movement which confronts opera's queer relationship to passion is the emergence of the Italian *Verismo* (realist) style. The novelty of this style was primarily thematic; as Schoell writes, "Verismo operas focused not on gods, mythological features, or kings and queens, but on the average contemporary man and woman and their problems, generally of sexual, romantic, or violent nature" (7). This movement towards the real reflects a new conception of opera as a vehicle for depicting ordinary life; the lofty and alienating characteristics of the art form were supplanted by illustrations which challenge the audience to confront societal malfeasance. Wagner was often cited as an influence for Verismo, and thus the question of realism comes into play in a medium that can stretch truth and warp our sense of normal/real in its presentations. Here, the passion of the dramatic arts and the passions of the everyday life come together to create melodrama, a queer genre.

The developments of the *Verismo* movement reflect new approaches to the operatic realization of passion, as *Verismo* operas featured distinctive alterations to dramatic construction that manifest most apparently in the treatment of the voice. Musicologists Adriana Guarnieri Corazzol and Roger Parker (1993) observe the vocal characteristics that typify *Verismo's* conception of passion; "vocal writing exploiting the high register of each voice type; irregular rhythms and phrases, spoken or shouted utterances, heavily charged melodies; 'physiological' rhythmic ideas..." (40). In the *Verismo* style, moments of immense passion are thus realized through interpretively somewhat unoperatic means; the climaxes in *Verismo* operas are executed

through dramatic and humanistic methods. A sociological analysis of this phenomenon is posited by Parker and Corazzol;

Its [Verismo opera's] modernity was above all a fashion, its function was popular; it was, in other words, a feature of mass culture. It employed all stylistic levels in order to reach all sectors of the market; it dealt in direct emotion, willed the spectator to be absolutely involved in the drama. (52)

Parker and Corazzol illustrate that the penetration of the commercial and emergence of popular art fueled support for *Verismo* opera, operas which are today among the most frequently performed by opera companies across the globe. For them, the *Verismo* canon is primarily one of "melodrama - a repository for emotional exhibitionism" (44).

Theorist Jonathan Goldberg (2016) offers a queer analysis of melodrama in opera in his discussion of Beethoven's *Fidelio*, an opera in which a woman must dress as a man in order to rescue her husband from prison. He observes, "Melodram [*sic*, from Beethoven's German] intimates ways past the impossible gender/political situation; it discovers new possibilities of rationality. So doing, it suggest that aesthetic enjoyment of opera may transcend the ideology of gender difference on which its plot depends" (156). Goldberg is arguing for a a reverence of melodramatic opera within the struggle for queer liberation. A queer reverence of melodrama is further developed in theorist David Halperin's (2012) discussion of the genre. Halperin focuses on gay masculinity; he writes,

Gay male culture positively glories in inauthenticity because inauthenticity has the potential to level differential scales and degrees of seriousness, to dismantle social hierarchies based on them, and to promote more egalitarian social order— at least, one more favorable to stigmatized or marginalized groups. That is why melodrama, not tragedy, is the aesthetic form most congenial to gay culture. (283)

Halperin is asserting that a purely capitalist analysis of melodrama, such as the one espoused by Parker and Corazzol, ignores the heteronormative assumptions that accompany the definition of authentic passion. As gay eroticism is vehemently condemned and stigmatized by masculine

hegemony, prescribed notions of genuine behavior, which are artistically manifested in tragedies rather than melodramas, are in fact weapons of queer marginalization. Authentic attribution to melodramatic passion can thus be interpreted as a queer phenomenon, in that melodrama functions as a site of queer realization of selfhood.

It is important to recall the defect of Halperin's analysis; his subject is the middle-class white gay male. As intersectional discourse instructs us that the facets of an individual's identity can compound their marginalization, different degrees of privilege within the gay community can thus shape an individual's respective degree of acceptance and affirmation within sites of socialization. Questions of racialization and classicism in opera will be addressed in the next chapter, as these questions are crucial to conceptualizing opera within the sociological imaginary.

Conclusion

This chapter's primary concern was a foundational exploration of the fundamental question, how, from a sociological perspective, does the art form of opera resonate with queer audiences? What qualities of the medium itself precipitate an affective response among (some) gay consumers? The art form's veneration of the voice evokes a transcendence of corporeality; this transcendence materializes an ethereal sphere beyond the socially demarcated body, and bodies that possess deviant sexualities can participate in this mythical sphere through the consumption of the work. Opera is also a historically considered the most passionate art form, despite its investiture in melodrama. This attribution of melodrama can be perceived as a hegemonic construction, which further vilifies queer people; if gay passion is so violently policed, how can queer people expect to exhibit the same ideation of restraint and authenticity

adopted by the heterosexual shapers of society? These considerations establish the opera format's queer sociological salience, and explicate its aptitude for providing a platform for the spiritual realization of a post-binary futurity.

~Act II~

Opera and the Dawn of the American Musical Idiom

Opera's insistent survival in the age of mass media and globally available art, despite "the death certificate neatly signed by critics, intellectuals, sociologists, and vanguards" (Benzecry 2), necessitates a discussion of who is consuming opera, and why new works that fall into the category of 'opera' have evolved to sound the way they do. In this chapter I focus on the consumption and dissemination of opera in the United States, where the form is "lacking national traditions of its own" (Martorella 1982) compared to its European audiences. I primarily draw on the scholarship of Alex Ross (2004), who traces the development of classical music throughout the 20th century using socio-historical scholarly approaches. As the societal composition of our population is far more racially heterogeneous than Europe, investigating questions of the racialization of the cult of opera will expose the process of its relegation to privileged social circles. I diverge a bit in this chapter from queer sociological perspectives to focus on intersectional considerations of race and class, as the attribution of marginality by hegemonic structures upon any identity holds wider implications for the methodology of prescribing deviance against all bodies that do not conform to the white, cis-patriarchal norm.

I'll begin with an impression of the impact of the operatic form on American musical culture from the scholarly work of sociologist of opera Rosanne Martorella (1982); she writes,

With the rise of urban centers and an influx of immigrant populations, secular music became increasingly middle class, but retained strong European allegiances which have, to date, fostered a distrust of experimentation in modern repertoire. Opera is a European import, which has formed the tradition of serious music in America, especially since the middle of the nineteenth century, and is distinct from the vernacular of religious and ragtime music. (Martorella 1982: 43)

Martorella's assertion defines the artistic role of opera in the American musical climate; she conceptualizes it as "serious" music, distinctive from more mass-consumable forms. Ross (2004)

corroborates Martorella's claim; on the state of classical music in the country at the beginning of the 20th century, he writes, "the orchestral repertory gravitated toward the Austro-German tradition, most musicians were immigrants, and many rehearsals took place in German... For the rich, classical music was a status symbol, a collector's delight. Millionaires signed up musicians in much the same way they bought up and brought home pieces of European art" (27). The consumption of opera in the U.S. at the time thus conformed to the ideation of opera that perpetuates into today; it is a classicized art form, with a foundation in the social exhibition of capital wealth.

As the European classical tradition became entrenched in the U.S., the methodologies of composing were shifting and responding to the heightened globalism of the modern era. This was the era that introduced atonality, a method of music writing primarily associated with composer Arnold Schönberg, where adherence to a key is avoided, resulting in an often uncomfortable sonority for the average Western listener (see Ross 2004: 36-79). As Western harmony began to unravel, composers began searching for inspiration in ostensibly unconventional sources: the folk music of their homelands, music on the opposite end of the class spectrum (Ross 2004: 83). In the U.S., this new impetus catalyzed a confrontation between the emerging genre of jazz and the classical canon. How these genres interacted can be interpreted sociologically to reveal how projects of social hierarchization segregated the operatic repertoire from the tradition of American black music, which is the music that evolved into the passionately mass-consumed genres of rock, hip-hop, pop, soul, Broadway, R&B, and funk, among others.

As jazz became the primary commercial idiom of popular music in the early 20th century, composers adopted various approaches to integrate and co-opt its innovations. French composers employed an ethic of exoticization, using rag rhythms and jazz embellishments primarily as gimmicks (Ross 2004: 109). Antonin Dvořák, of the aforementioned folk music class of composers, saw the genre as the key to creating a uniquely American iteration of classical music, and exemplified responsible social consciousness by encouraging the development to come from black composers themselves (Ross 2004: 132). Dvořák's entreaty to welcome black composers into the classical canon never came to fruition; as Ross writes, "hitting the wall of prejudice, these young creative musicians would turn to popular styles instead— first out of frustration, then out of ambition, and finally out of pride" (2004: 140). The racial stratification of the nation thus barred African American composers from inhabiting spaces of serious musical consideration. This catalyzed a double effect of both the formation of a separate sphere of art from the European model, and the prescription of the musical characteristics of jazz as decidedly unfit for integration into the shifting ideation of classical music. I find it telling that in Carolyn Abbate and Roger Park's *A History of Opera* (2012), which claims "to survey the entire 400-year" history of the art form (xiii), jazz music and black composers of opera are completely left out of the narrative, while white atonal and modernist composers are allotted prominent sections of text. As Ross succinctly summarizes,

Dvořák had assumed that American music would come into its own when it succeeded in importing African-American material into European form, but in the end the opposite thing happened: African-American composers appropriated European material into self-invented forms of blues and jazz. (2004: 165).

As music composition and the exhibition of new musical works became another site of racist oppression, the composers that achieved some success at inhabiting both spheres of art, the

lofty and conservative classical canon and the new American canon of jazz, were white, male, and primarily Jewish composers who appropriated "the characteristic devices of African-American musicking—the bending and breaking of diatonic scales, the distortion of instrumental timbre, the layering of rhythms, the blurring of the distinction between verbal and nonverbal sound" (Ross 2004: 132). Perhaps no piece of music encapsulates this phenomenon as representatively as the Jewish composer George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, an operatic work that depicts the lives of African-Americans living in a fishing village in the south. An excerpt from scholar William Schoell's (2006) book *The Opera of the Twentieth Century* summarizes the debate surrounding the categorization of Gershwin's piece;

... [A] controversy about the work is whether or not it is actually an opera. Gershwin was seen as a Broadway composer, a tin pan alley tune-smith, not a serious composer. Much of the music was in a popular, even jazzy vein. Much of it was seen as "Negro" music — some of the score was inspired by spirituals — an attitude which brought along with it an inevitably racist condescension that was standard for the period... But *Porgy and Bess* is an opera — an American folk opera. It can not and perhaps should not be compared to the Grand Operas of the European masters, but on its own in terms it is a legitimate operatic masterpiece. (164)

Schoell's statement resonates with much of what this chapter has been exploring. It reveals how the racialization of the sphere of American folk music created anxiety among compositional elitists, who were inclined to segregate black innovations from the dominant developments of the era.

Although I agree with Schoell's assertion that we should consider *Porgy and Bess* as an "operatic masterpiece", and as an "American folk opera", its fetishization of the African-American historical narrative, as well as its culturally appropriative composition, invite the discussion of a deeper sociological critique. Through the analysis of the responses of the black press to *Porgy and Bess's* 1935 premier, scholars Ray Allen and George P. Cunningham (2005) summarize the debate surrounding the work;

The ideology of cultural uplift, always filtered through the perspective of double-consciousness, drove African American critics to assess and reassess the contributions that *Porgy and Bess* might make in the ongoing struggle for the recognition of black culture, the legitimization of black performing artists, and the emergence of a self-conscious black creative vision. (363)

The ideology the authors refer to in the beginning of the quote most aptly conforms to the racial philosophy of W. E. B. Du Bois, who at the time "had been calling for a 'Talented Tenth' of black intellectuals and artists to lead the masses to a better place in society" (Ross 2004: 138). Du Bois envisioned the cultural ascendancy of African Americans occurring through performances of excellency and competence in white-dominated societal institutions, and *Porgy and Bess*, "sung by conservatory-trained African Americans, represented a significant advance in the presence of black artists culture on the American stage" (Allen and Cunningham 2005: 351).

On the other side of the debate, Allen and Cunningham (2005) highlight that "as an opera with a composed score for singers and full symphonic accompaniment, Gershwin's production foregrounded the composer, the compositional process, and the resulting score more than the folk sources" (348). They are arguing that the very form of opera centralizes the artistic success of the work onto Gershwin, and he is consequently capitalizing on the cultural products of a marginalized group he doesn't belong to. Allen and Cunningham (2005) also draw on the criticisms of the preeminent African American composer Duke Ellington, who saw the celebration of *Porgy and Bess* within Du Bois's ideation of cultural progress as an "ideology that valued inherited European forms" and that "was an imposition upon black artists and audiences because it did not truly reflect their own aesthetic tastes and values" (361). Ellington argued for a "rejection of the European forms of opera and symphony in favor of extended jazz works" (Ibid) as a more socially perceptive method for achieving social and spiritual liberty under the hegemony of whiteness.

The opposing sides of the *Porgy and Bess* debate exemplify the dichotomy between liberationist and assimilationist approaches to deconstructing structures of social oppression, a dichotomy that is explored in contexts of queer liberation by sociologist Stephen Seidman (2002). He writes, "In short, assimilationists want homosexuals to be recognized and accepted as good sexual citizens; liberationists challenge the sexual norms associated with this ideal" (173). The difference is between an endogenous approach to mitigate oppression, from within existing structures of hierarchy production, and an approach that rejects the sanctity of the very structures themselves. We can imagine that a liberationist approach would empower all marginalized identities collectively by completely subverting the weaponization of identity enacted by white cisgender patriarchy, a system of social codification that predicates itself on othering in order to accrue dominance to a specific class of individuals.

Conclusion

In the end, *Porgy and Bess*, and other musical dramatic works that relied heavily on African-American innovations, were absorbed into the musical genre, rather than maintaining a position within the canon of opera (Allen and Cunningham 2005: 363). As a result, the American operatic repertoire continues to comprise primarily of the European "standards"; as Martorella (1982) writes, "The repertoire of the five major companies in the United States shows a dominance of Italian opera with a predominance of Verdi, Puccini, and Rossini. Wagner and Mozart also appear with regularity" (109).⁴ Martorella also highlights how some companies

⁴ Although writing in 1982, the "standardization of repertoire" Martorella observes would probably prove to hold true into today, as no dramatic cultural shift surrounding opera consumption has been witnessed since the time of her writing.

challenge this dominant mode of production; on the New York City Opera Company, the company responsible for the production of the operas that will be discussed in Act IV, she writes, "Undoubtedly, the total number of productions and composers has represented a diverse repertoire, which includes unfamiliar works of well-known composers, and more experimental and avant-garde productions of contemporary composers. Even with shorter season than that of other companies, it has staged the works of a far greater number of composers" (104). The next chapter will explore the history of the company, in order to provide an understanding of its positionality within the artistic milieu of the country and "set the stage" for a closer examination of the production of *Angels in America* and *Brokeback Mountain*.

~Act III~

The New York City Opera and Investing in the Gay Dollar

The history of the New York City Opera Company can be characterized as densely tumultuous, constantly vacillating between the brink of economic failure and relative security. Its history is a compelling microcosm for the tension of actualizing a patriotic insurgence into a European artistic context throughout the second half of the 20th century into the 21st. This chapter will undertake a socio-historical analysis of the company's history in order to "set the stage" for engaging with the subject operas. As the operas, and the marketing strategies appropriated for them by the company, are targeted at a gay audience, juxtaposing an analysis of marketing to queer audiences will elucidate how this peculiar moment in opera's history has emerged. This juxtaposition will argue that the marketing to queer audiences, through the inclusion of operas on gay themes, by the company post-bankruptcy implicates socially problematic connotations.

Social History of the NYC Opera Company

Let us begin with the radix of the company itself. The company was founded amidst the socialist fervor of the late 1930's, when the Works Progress Association (WPA) was rolling out to combat the economic paucity Great Depression. Against this milieu, Fiorello La Guardia emerged as the new mayor of New York City, and assumed the role of embracing this new imaginary of benevolent democracy. Part of the WPA was the Federal Music Project, which attempted to generate economic growth with public investment in the arts (Sokol 1981: 5).

Historian of the company Martin Sokol (1981) succinctly summarizes the milieu that precipitated

the company's founding; he writes, "These then were the force at work by the start of 1940— a public in search of low-priced, high quality entertainment, federal funding in the form of WPA grants, a mayor eager to enhance the city's cultural life, and two dedicated, knowledgeable, and extremely capable workers in the persons of Newbold Morris and Morton Baum" (5).

The election of opera specifically as this entertainment exemplifies the changes in the social composition of the city, and the country, at the time. Immigrants fleeing the Second World War were arriving by the thousands in New York, from "operatic centers of Europe such as Berlin, Vienna, and Munich" (Sokol 30). These new citizens were eager to consume the art form of their homelands, a fervor compounded by the lack of accessible quality opera in the city dominated by the established and socially and economically insular Metropolitan Opera (Ibid). Indeed, the Metropolitan Opera Company was founded in 1883 by the emergent wealthy class of post-industrial America, a group eager to establish a center for cultural consumption and class performance (Sokol 1981: 27). The New York company opened sixty years later, on February 21st, 1943, with a production of Puccini's *Tosca* (Sokol 1981: 56).

In September of 1947, the New York City Opera company was prepping for its seventh season. A New York Times interview by Noel Straus with the artistic manager of the company at the time, Laszlo Halasz, provides an understanding of the company's new adopted purpose, as well as the inherent challenges in maintaining that purpose;

"Last year, when we tried our hand at operas that departed from the standard repertoire,' Mr. Halasz said, "there was much disappointment, inside and outside of the theater, as to whether pursuing such a course would not ruin us financially, it being the general contention of most opera companies in this country that unless your present 'La Traviata' or 'Rigoletto,' [popular romantic operas, both written in the 19th century, both by Verdi] the public will not attend. But our experience shows that this is a misconception, or, as we have reason to believe, there has been a change in public taste. Last season we found that the three works not in the beaten path, which we put on, 'Ariadne,' 'Salome,' and 'Eugene Onegin' brought sold-out houses at all of their performances." (Halasz, from Straus 1947).

Halasz and Straus's assertions indicate that the company was resolved to operationalize an ardent belief in the potential for a liberalist production model of opera in the 20th century, namely, one that treats the art form as flexible and responsive to changing conceptions of artistry. Straus goes on; he writes, "Because of this success, the company has definitely adopted the policy of specializing in opera outside of the common run. For the box-office receipts proved that the public was eager for novelties and revivals" (Ibid).

It is justified to affirm the company's early success at liberalizing the operatic form, and expanding its accessibility; I'll highlight several episodes to provide empirical examples. The company's casting of Todd Duncan, a black baritone, marked the first African American "to sing a leading role with a major American company" and this feat surpassed "the Met's belated elimination of racial barriers by nearly a decade" (Sokol 1981: 64). The next year, in 1949, the company elected as its first world premier the opera *Troubled Island* by the African American composer William Grant Still, to a libretto by Langston Hughes (Sokol 1981: 66). In its spring 1954 season, the company presented the Jerome Kern musical *Show Boat* as part of its season, which was a success with the public but faced harsh criticism from the press, "which felt that it had no place in an operatic repertoire" (Sokol 1981: 126). This indicates the company's unfaltering commitment to its mission, despite adversity from the established ideation of what opera should be.

As the company approached the end of the 1950's, it would face its first of many major financial challenges, as it attempted to maintain its mission and compete with the Metropolitan Opera Company. I return to Sokol (1981), who highlights the state of the company in 1956;

...the future of the company appeared almost hopeless... finances were at an all-time low, the most lucrative city in their annual tour had been lost, public confidence and interest had dwindled, and for the first time in their thirteen years of existence it became necessary to cancel a season. (140)

To overcome this dismal condition, the company elected a new strategy to regain capital by appealing to the recently established Ford Foundation Program in Humanities and the Arts (Sokol 1981: 154). The philanthropic foundation awards grants based on a mission "to reduce poverty and injustice, strengthen democratic values, promote international cooperation, and advance human achievement."⁵ To conform to this mission, the idea was forged to present a season "devoted entirely to American opera" (Sokol 1981: 154). This strategy proved to be successful, subversive, and patriotic; it "did more for the cause of American opera than anything that had come before" (158). Under the patronage of the foundation, the company produced American-focused seasons until 1960, and this display of nationalism had a lasting effect on the perception of American opera worldwide (Sokol 1981: 165).

After a relatively smooth location transition to Lincoln Center in 1965, the company would face two serious economic crises in the form of strikes by the orchestra members over the summer of 1968 after the company's 47th season and in the fall of 1973.⁶ Striking would become a common routine in the company, occurring in intervals of three years with the end of contracts (Sokol 1981: 193), evidencing a nearly perpetual economic strain realizing itself in the dissatisfaction of the company's musicians with their compensation for performing. Sociologist Rosanne Martorella's (1977) study comparing the repertoires of several different opera companies from 1966-1975 provides a capital analysis that can deepen our understanding of why

⁵ <https://www.fordfoundation.org/about-us/mission/>

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/topic/organization/new-york-city-opera?8qa>

this economic instability lingered into the 1970's. In differentiating between the conservative opera companies of the Metropolitan Opera and the Lyric Opera of Chicago, she observes,

The history of these two houses [the Met and the Lyric Opera], in fact, reveals a long standing commitment to the works of Wagner, Verdi, and Puccini with more recent interest in Donizetti and Rossini. Both have similar support from the upper class in their cities and long-time immigrant subscribers, who share European allegiances. San Francisco Opera and the New York City Opera remain contrasts. They are companies in which contemporary operas and more avant-grade productions are a regular event, as evidenced by their occurrence in all the seasons surveyed. In comparison, their public is younger, and from the beginning were made to expect something out of the ordinary from the directors of the companies. The minimal representation of contemporary works in the repertoire, however, indicates that such works are predominately presented by university workshops and small experimental theatre groups across the nation, who can afford to produce them because of their foundation and government subsidies. (362-363)

Martorella is illuminating the relegation of contemporary and subversive works into more elite intellectual circles; the mass appeal of non-traditional opera was definitively beginning to abate.

As the company prepared for the next decade, the appointment of a new general manager in the personage of Beverly Sills, a then retired opera star who had made her career singing with the company, would prove to catalyze the momentum it needed to survive into the approaching millennium. After "the longest strike in the company's history" (Page 1983) in 1983, Sills pioneered several innovative initiatives that sustained the City Opera's positionality of artistic subversiveness. The first of these efforts was the inclusion of English subtitles broadcast above the stage during the performance, an experiment that was completely novel at the time to American opera companies (Tommasini 2007). Sills employed this strategy in an effort to embrace an egalitarian vision of opera and focus on its storytelling capacity; in a New York Times article by John Rockwell dated October 23, 1983, he writes, "...Miss Sills reported, 'infrequent' operagoers [sic] were even more enthusiastic about the subtitles than frequent operagoers and subscribers. That leads her to a hope that with regular, well-publicized usage of

subtitles, a whole new audience can be attracted to City Opera performances." This excerpt highlights the company's belief in the continual relevance of opera to the masses.

Another initiative under Sills' tenure was the continued effort to radicalize the conception of the art form through the inclusion of non-traditionally operatic works. The company notably included the musical *Sweeney Todd* by Stephen Sondheim in 1984, and although it had included musicals in its repertory in the past, the milieu surrounding the genre in the 80's adds another dimension to Sills' decision, as the generic line between the Broadway musical and opera was becoming increasingly blurred. Music critic Will Crutchfield, in a Times article published October 12, 1984, asserted, "Opera companies, traditionally suspicious of 'commercial' art, are turning more and more readily to Broadway classics and even experimenting with recent hits. And Broadway, in turn, is producing musical scores of a sophistication that can challenge and reward operatic professionals beyond the level of their initial appeal." Later in the article, Crutchfield cites an interview he held with the singer helming the City Opera's production, who stated, "'The Broadway musical is the new American opera; it's as simple as that'" (Ibid). These realizations evidence a societal shift in the consciousness surrounding the operatic form; opera can henceforth be consumable by a broader audience in the musical form.

On November 17, 1985, the Times ran an article by Donal Henahan with the headline "CITY OPERA'S ASTONISHING GOOD HEALTH"⁷ indicating that Sills' efforts had achieved a satisfying degree of success for the company. On June 29, 1986, an article by John Rockwell read "CITY OPERA RAISES THE CURTAIN ON BETTER TIMES" (Ibid). In the fall of that same year, the company premiered Anthony Davis's *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, despite

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/topic/organization/new-york-city-opera?8qa>

resistance from the company's Jewish constituents over the association of the opera's subject with anti-semitism, demonstrating Sills's commitment to elevating controversial works and encouraging the diversification of the repertoire (Rockwell 1986). By the end of Sills' tenure in 1989, the company was in an extremely comfortable and successful position; as Tommasini (2007) writes, "The budget had grown from \$9 million to \$26 million, and the \$3 million deficit had become a \$3 million surplus."

Immediately after Sills departure, the company would experience another strike that would result in the cancellation of its fall season (Henahan 1989). After yet another recovery, under the new management of Christopher Keene, the company would maintain the innovations of Sills into the 90's, continually producing new American works, and liberally integrating Broadway musicals into the repertoire. A notable production from this era of the City Opera's history is an opera about the life of Harvey Milk, a famous openly gay politician who was assassinated in office as city supervisor of San Francisco in 1978.⁸ Critic Bernard Holland's (1995) review succinctly encapsulates the significance of this production within the chronology of American opera;

It [the opera] or something like it has been inevitable, if not overdue. Such is the powerful attraction of the gay sensibility to grand opera. Gay men form a passionate audience for the medium, and the creative among them are key operatives in its design, production, and performance... An emerging culture not only insinuates its conception to opera but occupies its stage outright.

I'll use Holland's review to diverge from discussing the company's history and transition into a discussion of the emergence and proliferation of marketing to queer audiences, and the marketing of queerness itself, across media, during the same era and into the 2000's.

⁸ <http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org/HarveyMilkDay/Biography.html>

From Deviance to Tolerance: LGBT Integration into Mainstream Capitalism

In *Beyond the Closet: The Transformation of Gay and Lesbian Life*, sociologist Stephen Seidman (2002) undertakes a sweeping study of the integration of gay and lesbian identity into mainstream society. He notes that a significant change in the visibility of queerness began in the 1970s, and he expounds the resulting cultural change; "Gays began to come out—in their families, at work, and in the political arena. Popular culture discovered the homosexual. The idea of an exclusively heterosexual public sphere was challenged." (127). From his studies of Hollywood films of the 1970's and 80's, Seidman goes on to specify that artistic depictions of homosexual individuals "were almost uniformly condemning" (128); he terms the mainstream ideation of homosexuals as "polluted" and that they are posited in contrast to the "pure and good human status" of heterosexuality (132).

In the 90's, Seidman argues that a new societal ideation superseded the pollutive rhetoric of the past, in the emergence of what he terms the "normal gay" (133). Although this status distinction is presented "as fully human, as the psychological and moral equal of the heterosexual" (Ibid), acceptable gay identity is codified and policed by heteronormative assumptions of gender and intimacy, assumptions which dismiss gender nonconformity and individual affinity towards non-monogamous intimate relationships; Seidman writes, "A gender order that divides men and women into different and complementary identities and roles underpins a social order that assumes the naturalness and correctness of heterosexuality" (137). Gays of color are not bestowed this normalcy because queerness instead compounds their deviance; lesbians are perceived as asexual and, consequently, asocial; trans people are punished

for not willfully conforming to the gender order. In short, the "normal gay" is a middle-class white gay male, whose mainstream acceptance lies in his purchasing power.

In the new millennium, mainstream cultural progress among Seidman's "normal gays" would rapidly accelerate. In 2003 gay men found legal affirmation of their sexual practices in the U.S. Supreme Court decision of *Lawrence v. Texas*, which ruled the criminalization of same-sex sodomy unconstitutional (Burgess 2006: 401). To provide an empirical example of the positionality of gays within American capitalism during this decade, I'll include a discussion of the hugely successful (and recently revamped) reality television show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, which originally aired on the Bravo channel the same year of the *Lawrence* ruling (Ibid). Sociologist Joshua Gamson (2005) summarizes the colossal success of, and passionate investment by the public in, the show's original run;

The Fab 5, each of whom has a special expertise—grooming, culture, food and wine, interior decorating, and fashion—are funny, warm, and witty. Straight men thank the Fab 5 profusely, praise them to their friends, and hug them; straight women gush about and around them. They have appeared on NBC's "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno," "Oprah," the MTV Video Music Awards, and the season premiere of the NBC sitcom "Good Morning, Miami." They have been parodied on Fox's "Mad TV," and inspired a Comedy Central take-off, "Straight Plan for the Gay Man." "Queer Eye" has often drawn over 3 million viewers, more than twice the number of viewers any Bravo show had previously attracted, often beating out the major networks for viewers; when NBC first aired it, the show drew 7 million viewers and tied for first in its time slot among 18-49-year-old viewers. (3)

Queer Eye was a ground-breaking and record-breaking moment for TV and society alike, catapulting and codifying a queer aestheticism into American households nationwide. We can problematize this aesthetic by exposing its grounding in the hegemonic reverence of consumerist aptitude. Gamson (2005) writes, "Gay men become master shoppers and instructors in social class, teaching straight men to become more effective heterosexuals: by becoming more effective consumers and more 'classy'" (8).

With *Queer Eye* as a compelling example, capitalist market propensity thus became the definition of gay mainstream success in this era. This definition consequently begins to work in the reverse as well - queer sexuality became marketable. I recall Katy Perry's 2008 "I Kissed a Girl", which topped the Billboard Hot 100 charts for no less than 7 weeks that summer,⁹ and in which the singer asserts, "It's not what I'm used to, just wanna try you on/ I'm curious for you, caught my attention/ I kissed a girl and I liked it/ Taste of her cherry chapstick"¹⁰. Perry's lyrics posit queer erotics as a kind of social game, and in that game they affirm the performance of gay sexuality while simultaneously commodifying and perpetuating its deviant status. I harken back to the introduction by admitting that this was one of mine and my aforementioned friend's favorite songs in middle school.

I'll conclude this discussion of queer marketing by delineating the shift that occurred as the nation entered the post-marriage equality era. The 2018 *Queer Eye* revamp on Netflix provides a window into this shift; in the first episode, fashion expert Tan France professes, "The original show was fighting for tolerance. Our fight is for acceptance." Tolerance can be imagined as a sort of begrudgingly co-habitation, whereas acceptance connotes an active and deliberate embrace by heterosexuals of the condition of gay identity. Food expert Antoni Porowski follows up with "my goal is to figure out how we're similar as opposed to how different we are", then Karamo Brown, the culture expert, "We all got to come together and understand each other" (Netflix: "You Can't Fix Ugly). All of these sentiments reflect an assimilationist queer ethic that doesn't engage with the root causes of homophobia; the stratification of the gender binary. Masculinist capitalism has shepherded non-normative sexuality into the status quo, and

⁹ <https://www.billboard.com/music/Katy-Perry/chart-history/hot-100/song/566388>

¹⁰ <http://www.metrolyrics.com/i-kissed-a-girl-lyrics-katy-perry.html>

subsequent progress in our community will continue to be hampered by this consistent penetration of hegemony into how gender identity should be performed.

Conclusion: The NYC Opera Now

With some context on the progression of queer marketing discussed, I'll conclude this chapter with a return to the history of NYC opera, to complete the chronological picture of the company and explicate its status in the present. After Keene, the company would find new management in the personage of Paul Kellogg. (Tommasini 2007). During his tenure, Kellogg operationalized a continued dedication to Sills' innovations and the company's populist ethic. He also helmed the company after the 9/11 attacks, opening the fall season of 2001 just four days afterward, taking the stage under an American flag and affirming the spiritual value of the performing arts for providing "cathartic, consolation, shared experience, reaffirmation of civilized values, distraction" in the wake of the horror and uncertainty that the attacks catalyzed (Kellogg, from Tommasini 2007). The company seemed poised to survive into the new millennium, but a moment of crisis occurred when the slated successor for Kellogg, Gerard Mortier, resigned before the beginning of his first season over a dramatic reduction of the budget (Milnes 2015). The reduction can be attributed to the broader economic climate of the late 2000's, as the great recession was taking its toll on the country (Opera News 2008). The company consequently elected George Steel, who moved the company out of its Lincoln center home due to unsustainable rental costs in 2011 (Cooper and Pogrebin 2013).

After the loss of a permanent performance space, the company presented operas in various venues around the city, but this model of presentation proved to be an impossible feat to

sustain; after "an urgent drive to raise \$7 million for its very survival" (Ibid) failed, the company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy and ended its 70 year-long existence. Talks of reviving the company began "barely a year later" (Milnes 2015), and were initiated by Michael Capasso, who had headed another opera company in New York City before its downfall, and Roy Niederhoffer, a successful hedge fund manager (Ibid). In an interview on Bloomberg TV, Niederhoffer explained his vision for the revived company, and how he believed it could remain economically viable going forward;

We have the opportunity to create a blank slate. New York City Opera is a truly beloved brand. I cannot even tell you the number of people that said to me 'Oh, isn't it a shame that city opera's gone?'... But what it needed was a complete restart. It needed an entrepreneurial rather than an institutional way of looking at things, and very often when a company restarts it can do that. You don't have to pare down from where you were, you can start fresh. So that's our plan. We've been working for the last year; a board that I put together, and most importantly a truly experienced general director named Michael Capasso, who's three and a half decades of opera production, and direction, and touring - every aspect of opera business experience, with that, with my technical lead, we have the business skills in our board, and certainly the financial backing to make this happen. That's our plan. (Bloomberg TV broadcast February 20, 2015)

With this optimism the company was reborn at the Rose Theater at Lincoln Center, with a production of none other than *Tosca*, the same opera that it had opened with at its birth in 1943 (Tommasini 2016). Political considerations will prove to be key component of the "entrepreneurial" model that Niederhoffer alleges, through initiatives that are ostensibly put into place to embrace and empower marginalized identities, and that will be discussed in the next chapter.

~Act IV~

Deconstructing the Resurrected City Opera's LGBT Initiative:

Angels in America and Brokeback Mountain

Today, New York City Opera continues its legacy at a new, state-of-the-art home at the Rose Theater at Jazz at Lincoln Center. Taking inspiration from the vibrant community around it, City Opera celebrates diversity with a new Ópera en Español series and LGBT Initiative, and revitalized outreach and education programs are cultivating and inspiring the next generation of City Opera audiences.¹¹

The above blurb comes from the "About" page of the New York City Opera's website, and encapsulates the company's post-bankruptcy spirit of continuing to provide a space for accessible, populist, and patriotic opera. In this chapter, I will critically examine the company's LGBT initiative by analyzing the two operas on gay themes which constitute its crux, *Angels in America* by Peter Eötvös, Tony Kushner, and Mari Mezei, produced last season, and *Brokeback Mountain* by Charles Wuorinen and Annie Proulx, premiering in May. To provide a holistic perspective, I will engage with the text and history of the source materials of the operas, primarily focusing on *Angels*, as it has already been produced by the company, in order to more comprehensively analyze the sociological implications of their adaptations into the operatic form in the present queer moment.

Angels in America: Impressions of the New Broadway Production

The experience of seeing a production of *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner is profoundly monumental. The play is in two parts, each part is about three and a half hours, and each features two intermissions. Ticket buyers purchase both parts, and either see both plays on a

¹¹ <https://nycopera.com/about/>

single day, or see them on separate nights. As part of my research, I had the opportunity to see the new Broadway production of both parts of *Angels*, currently running at the Neil Simon Theater, over the length of an entire Saturday. I arrived at the theater to witness an enormous line stretching around the block, and I heard many remark on the line's atypically colossal length, some stating that they had never seen a line so long to get into a theater before. The at-capacity audience was primarily composed of men, and from their dress and body language (many were coupled), I determined that a significant portion of them were gay. I've had the privilege of seeing quite a few Broadway shows, and a common intermission phenomenon is the absurd length of the line for the women's restroom, but at *Angels* in the Neil Simon Theater, the men's line was the one with the wait.

All of these impressions indicate the significance this work of art has to the gay cisgender male community, even a quarter of a century after the work's premier. Consumption of the play as a gay man exemplifies the social anthropological concept of "habitus" posited by theorist Pierre Bourdieu. Sociologist Kat Sender (2004) employs Bourdieu's term to understand the cultural practices of the hegemonically constructed idealized gay citizen; she writes, "class identification enables and requires members to cultivate a particular habitus... It is clear, however, that there is no single gay habitus. A race-, class-, and to some extent gender-limited constituency forms the most visible and socially sanctioned gay collectivity." (14-15). Sender's analysis can aid in interpreting the play's primary consumers. Seeing a Broadway play continues to be an expensive, and consequently class-insular, experience, and the economically advantaged gay male can operationalize his habitus by supporting and engaging with the art that confirms his status as a visible and socially normal citizen. Going to a production of *Angels* is thus more than

mere idle source of entertainment; it is an exercise in collective identity affirmation and social-hierarchical visibility.

With an imaginary of the contemporary audience of *Angels* discussed, I will shift to assessing the work's significance historically by providing some insight into the cultural milieu surrounding its initial production, and how the text of the play corroborates some of the central themes discussed over the course of the previous chapters.

An Entreaty for Queer Citizenry

There is a compelling amount of scholarship on the sociological and phenomenological implications of *Angels in America*, the popularity and artistic success of which cannot be understated (Geis and Kruger 1997: 1). The first part of the play, *Millennium Approaches*, premiered on Broadway in 1993, the second, *Perestroika*, followed a few months later. Both plays won the Tony Award for Best Play, the American theatrical award that can reasonably be considered of the highest degree of cultural capital, in 1993 and 1994 respectively.¹² From a historical perspective, scholar David Ramón contextualizes the play's premier within the dominant societal crisis facing the gay male community at the time of its writing and production: the AIDS epidemic. He writes, "As of October 31, 1992 - the day before the originally scheduled opening of the Taper's production of *Angels in America* - 245,621 cases of AIDS had been reported in the United States alone" (eds. Geis and Kruger 1997: 52). Of cases of the disease

¹² http://www.tonyawards.com/p/tonys_search

from 1981-2000, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 46% were the result of male-on-male sexual contact.¹³

The acceleration of AIDS cases throughout the 80s catalyzed a social war between American conservatives, which found validation and support in the regime of Ronald Reagan, and LGBT activist communities and their allies. The governmental zeitgeist was a policy of homophobic condemnation, casting the crisis as a kind of heavenly judgement upon the "polluted" (to refer back to Seidman) personhood of the homosexual male (White 2004). Against the backdrop of this ideological carnage, the play posits antithetical victims of the disease: Prior Walter and Roy Cohn, the former fictitious and the latter historical. Prior is attributed prophetic status for enduring the disease, while Cohn, a notorious McCarthy-era lawyer responsible for the deaths of several liberal politicians and conservatively labeled deviants over the course of his life, faces a sneeringly ironic death by the disease plaguing the community he vilifies, and hypocritically belongs to. An interpretative approach to the textual handling of this antithesis will serve as a foundation for engaging with the text's adaption to the operatic form.

Cohn's justification for his duplicity is presented in his monologue in Act I, Scene 9 of

Millennium Approaches. He declares,

No. Like all labels they tell you one thing and one thing only: where does an individual so identified fit in the food chain, in the pecking order? Not ideology, or sexual taste, but something much simpler: clout. Not who I fuck or who fucks me, but who will pick up the phone when I call, who owes me favors. This is what a label refers to. Now to someone who does not understand this, homosexual is what I am because I have sex with men. But really this is wrong. Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. Homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot get a pissant antidiscrimination [*sic*] bill through City Council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows Who have zero clout. Does this sound like me, Henry? (Kushner 1995: 51).

¹³ <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5021a2.htm#fig1>

Kushner writes Cohn's social imaginary as his primary motivation for closeting himself. He is vehemently afraid of being labeled as a deviant, and over-compensates by becoming a passionate homophobe.

In contrast to Cohn, Prior is attributed prophetic status throughout the play by the eponymous angels. He rejects martyrdom to survive the entire play's duration, and his characterization as a prophetic figure of the promise of outright queer acceptance materializes in *Perestroika's* concluding lines, which are delivered directly to the audience;

This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come. (Kushner 1995: 298)

Prior Walter's lines epitomize the hope for a new form of queer citizenry in the post-AIDS era, one which affirms the social normalcy of homosexuality, espousing an ostensibly assimilationist ethic, a longing to be part of the existing American citizenry. It is worth investigating the degree to which the play engages with a more liberationist ethic, which is presented primarily through the black gay drag queen character of Belize.

Scholar Framji Minwalla's (1997) perspective on the character provides a useful foundation for a closer analysis of the text;

By locating a black man at the ethical center of his fictive universe, and then playing his other characters off him, Kushner makes identity, especially racial and gendered identity, one of the central facts of the drama. Belize occupies that space against which we gauge the ideology, morality, actions—perhaps even the very humanity—of Kushner's other inventions. (ed. Geis and Kruger: 104)

From Minwalla's analysis, Belize's dramatic function is as a scalar unit for interpreting and confronting the degree of marginality of the other characters, as he "weighs in right at the bottom" of the social power hierarchy (eds. Geis and Kruger 1997: 107). His political

convictions consequently evoke a powerful degree of radicalism. Consider the imaginary of heaven he envisions in a conversation with Cohn;

And everyone in Balenciaga gowns with red corsages, and big dance palaces full of music and lights and racial impurity and gender confusion./ And all the deities are creole, mulatto, brown as the mouths of rivers/ Race, taste, and history finally overcome. And you ain't there. (Kushner 1995: 228)

Belize's vision of paradise abolishes white compositions of society in favor of an entirely new world founded on racial heterogeneity and gender deconstruction. Later, in a conversation with Louis, Prior's white and Jewish ex-lover who abandons him as he begins to get sicker, Belize once again demonstrates his liberatory zeal;

Well, I hate America, Louis. I hate this country. It's just big ideas, and stories, and people dying, and people like you. The white cracker who wrote the national anthem knew what he was doing. He set the word "free" to a note so high nobody could reach it. That was deliberate. Nothing on earth sounds less like freedom to me. (Kushner 1995: 247)

With the knowledge that Belize performs this role of radicalism, it is somewhat surprising that it is him who seeks out Louis to recite the Jewish "Kaddish", a prayer for the dead, to mourn the death of Cohn. Belize asserts that the recitation is to "thank him. For the pills", referring to the stash of Azidothymidine (AZT) he's been able to acquire from his political connections (Kushner 1995: 273, 207). Louis initially refuses, but Belize implores him by stating, "...A queen can forgive her vanquished foe. It isn't easy, it's the hardest thing. Forgiveness. Which is maybe where love and justice finally meet" (Kushner 1995: 274). Belize's act is one of radical compassion; even Cohn, the very embodiment of how his oppression operates, is deserved of forgiveness. To return to Ramón, the recitation of the prayer serves "as a reminder in the play of the AIDS activist claim that all people with AIDS are innocent" (eds. Geis and Kruger 1997: 53). Belize personifies the liberatory ethic of uncompromising human

equality, shaming revolutionary praxes that continue to hierarchize and socially categorize humanity.

With some of the textual handling of queer identity and positionality, and the play's entreaty for change discussed, we can shift to a critique of the operatic adaptation itself.

Eötvös's Angels

In the composer's own words, the challenge of adapting Kushner's play, a seven hour epic, into a roughly two-hour long opera, "we can use, perhaps, 10% from the original text" (Barbican Centre: 2:16). A discussion of what is omitted, and how the composer handles the text that remains, will problematize the political rectitude of the work.¹⁴ Most notably, Belize's character is significantly reduced; the score omits all of his political philosophizing, except a line declaring, in a high countertenor sonority, "If I were to spend my whole lonely life looking after white people, I can get underpaid to do it" (Moonlight Sonata: 1:00:13). Eötvös concedes that the political dimensions of the opera are sacrificed in the adaptation; in the program notes, he writes, "In the opera version, I put less emphasis on the political line than Kushner; I rather focus on the passionate relationships, on the highly dramatic suspense of the wonderful text, on the permanently uncertain state of the visions" (Eötvös 2004). As previously addressed, Belize's role in the liberatory competency of the play is essential, and his gross omission in the opera consequently erases a facet of the societal vision and promise of the work.

¹⁴ My knowledge of the opera is drawn from a recording of a performance from 2006. I couldn't access a live recording of the NYCO's production, but based on program notes and images from of it, I believe the productions are, for all intents and purposes, virtually the same. The NYCO production did see a reduction in the size of the orchestra (Stearns 2017).

Eötvös music falls most easily into the atonal-modernist genre discussed briefly in Act II. Much of the opera is actually spoken in rhythm, with ethereal orchestral gestures as accompaniment, and tonally ambiguous music dominating the score. The previously explored monologue by Cohn about his status is sung and spoken rhythmically over discordant instrumental accents, creating an unsettling and frightening effect (Moonlight Sonata 2015: 47:00). The next time we see him, he's close to death, and rather than have Belize catalyze the "Kaddish" recitation, the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, his "most famous casualty" (Román eds. Geig and Kruger 1997: 53), sings to him as he perishes to signify her forgiveness of him (Moonlight Sonata 2015: 1:50:00). This alteration naturally removes the aforementioned racial dimensionality of the play.

In conforming to these idioms of music, I feel that the opera lacks the accessibility it needs to be a successful work of politically liberatory art. The opera is sourced from one of the most significant works of the American theatrical canon, and outside of some rock-and-roll style guitar writing for Louis in his scenes with Joe (Moonlight Sonata 2015: 1:39:00), American musical innovations and ideas are notably lacking. These isolating effects of the score, compounded by the erasure of Belize's character, results in a perceivable failure of the opera to create an artistic imaginary of queer life that is intersectional or liberatory.

Brokeback Mountain

Charles Wuorinen's operatic adaption of *Brokeback Mountain* was "inspired by the 2005 blockbuster film", and the libretto is written by Annie Proulx, who wrote the short story the film

is adapted from.¹⁵ The story centers around the sexual intimacy of two cowboys in the 1960's midwest (Proulx 1997). To provide some understanding of the sociological implications of the film's historical success, the medium through which Proulx's narrative received the widest mainstream recognition, I'll include a discussion of the scholarship of culture scholars James R. Keller and Anne Goodwyn Jones (2008). Keller and Jones interpret the story and film through a critical theoretical lens that assesses how masculinity is performed in the narrative, and how this performance is deemed consumable by the film's audiences.

Although ostensibly radical as an insurrection of queerness into the heavily masculinized and patriotically embraced genre of the Western, they argue that *Brokeback's* handling of gay intimacy "depicts, even recuperates, traditional American masculinity" (2008: 24). They affirm the imaginary of queer visibility discussed in Act III; "The success of *Brokeback* signifies the effort to mainstream homosexuality in the American media— not so much from the position of moral or ethical imperative, but from the position of commerce. After all, the GLBT community is perceived to have a good deal of disposable income" (22). To both capitalize on the economic strength of the emergent wealthy GLBT citizenry, and still maintain a broader marketability, Keller and Jones (2008) highlight how the film conforms to heterosexist sensibilities;

...if the cinematic audience does not like what it sees, it will make the boys come down early from Brokeback Mountain, and the commercial audience will only support the content of the film if the homoerotic and homo-romantic themes are toned down (a minimal amount of kissing and romantic dalliance) and the characters appropriately filled with self-loathing and punished, either physically or emotionally. The compromises that Lee makes with the voyeuristic audience are intended to rescue the film from financial failure... (32)

¹⁵ <https://nycopera.com/tickets/>

With Keller and Jones' analysis, *Brokeback Mountain* can be understood as a product of assimilationist queer ethics; it sacrifices a more radical presentation of queerness to maintain cultural relevance within the straight, cisgender male hegemony.

A more empirical observation of the societal impact of *Brokeback* can be found in the internet podcast 'S-Town' (2017), produced by Serial Productions and hosted by Brian Reed. The podcast explores the real life of John, an older closeted gay man from a small Alabama town. In Chapter VI of the series, John's romantic and sexual relationships with men are addressed, and Reed interviews Olin Long, a man who engaged in an extended phone relationship with John for several years of his life (Reed 2017). Long realizes his spiritual wholeness through consuming the film, and encourages John to identify with it as well. Some excerpts from the transcript of the episode will highlight its impact on Olin and John;

Brian Reed: ...Olin dates life events as being before or after the movie's release.

Olin Long: I would venture to say probably 50 or more times. When it first came out, I couldn't get enough of it. I watched it about every day.

Brian Reed: To see a love story about two men like that, it moved him.

Olin Long: I wanted him [John] to relate to that. I wanted him to relate to it, and he didn't at first. But then, over time, we talked again... I ordered a copy, and had it sent to John... He read it. And after that, he always referred to it as his grief manual.

Brian Reed: And so this is what Olin and John's relationship eventually settled into. They were confidants and close friends, supporting each other through this experience they were both living, of being middle-aged and gay in Alabama, and alone... (Reed 2017)

I highlight this moment of the podcast because I believe it is an emblematic example of the affective power of art for constructing spaces of spiritual healing for marginalized folks. Olin and John are victims of intense societal repression; queerness in the region of the country they inhabit is far more heavily policed and erased than in more progressive urban centers such as New York. Through the affective consumption of the film and story, they are able to create and

inhabit more spiritually satisfying realities for themselves as gay men trapped in a conservative societal cage.

The music of Wuorinen's adaption is described revealingly by Titus Engel, the music director of the work's premier at the Teatro Real in Madrid; "Charles Wuorinen is influenced a lot of Arnold Schönberg... He is one of the American composers who are clearly for the, let's say, European modernity. He doesn't like the pop music influence in the classical music." (culturalmentetv 2014: 3:46). The opera's score can thus be conceptualized as evoking an auditory environment in a comparable vein to Eötvös's *Angles*, and is consequently as isolating to the ear. Although the opera has yet to premier in the U.S., I predict, based on the previously discussed sociological and musicological considerations, that it will fail to adequately "celebrate gay pride" as the City Opera claims it will.

Conclusion

As the focal areas of study in this thesis, I've forged an interpretative sociological framework for engaging with the operatic adaptations of *Angels in America* and *Brokeback Mountain* as flagships of the New York City Opera Company's LGBT Initiative through the queer aestheticism theoretical perspectives discussed in Act I, the intersectional critique of classical music discussed in Act II, and the economic analysis discussed in Act III. All of these factors precipitated the phenomenon of the operas in the contemporary queer moment, one in which the assimilationist vision of queerness has reached near complete fruition through the federal recognition of same-sex marriage. This success, though socially beneficial and spiritually cathartic for some queer bodies, cripples the progress of the queer community as a whole. We cannot continue to produce sites of gay visibility that profit from the cultural capital already retained by the most privileged in our communities, as this perpetuates the hierarchization of lived identity that is responsible for eviscerating the societal normalcy of queerness in the first place.

I want to include a brief discussion of an artistic work that can be identified as displaying a more liberationist political ethic than the subject operas. Lin-Manuel Miranda's hip-hop, all POC casted *Hamilton*, a 2016 musical that received widespread critical and commercial success, can partially serve as a model for what a more socially empowering work of art can be. Politically, it succeeds because it provides a space for marginalized bodies to reclaim an art form that had been co-opted historically by hegemonic agents of oppression, and it does so by subverting the traditional format of the genre through the employment of the hip-hop musical nomenclature. Perhaps if the white shapers of society had accepted rather than vilified art

produced from outside their rigid imaginary of acceptable lived identity, *Hamilton* would be exemplary of opera in America. Unfortunately, the problem of class still persists with the musical — tickets for *Hamilton* are among the most expensive of all Broadway shows. But the work itself does more for the political ascendancy and societal ubiquity of acceptable lived identity for oppressed groups than either the *Angels* or *Brokeback* operas can begin to claim. To conclude, I entreat the New York City Opera Company to adopt the following few measures if they truthfully strive to celebrate LGBT pride;

- Involve POC, gay, trans, intersex, disabled, and all other marginalized identities in every conceivable combination actively in the work of the company's season.
- Stage works that challenge preconceived notions of artistry, instead of assuming that social definitions of certain forms are unequivocally legitimate.
- Use the positionality of the company as a platform to help communities in need, through outreach, fundraising, advocacy, inclusive ticket pricing, and continued commitment to artistically and spiritually bolster the communities that face oppression from the forgers of hegemony.

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